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SIR ROBERT PEEL.



STATUE OF SIR ROBERT PEEL, BY GIBSON, IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY.

It is seldom that an impartial estimate can be formed of the character of those who have played a prominent part on the arena of politics until a considerable time has elapsed after removal from the scene of their labours. They are viewed in

their own day through the coloured glass of faction, and it is only when time has tempered the fury of the passion engendered by party zeal and antagonism that the real worth of their labours can be discerned and appreciated. But with

Sir Robert Peel the case is otherwise; his measures were of so thoroughly practical a character that common sense is sufficient to form an estimate of them; and this is, perhaps, the highest meed of praise that can be awarded to an individual who labours for the present generation as well as for posterity.

Sir Robert Peel was the eldest son of the first baronet of the name, and grandson of Mr. Peel, of Peel Cross, in Lancashire. The former was a cotton manufacturer at Bury, in that county, and realised a large fortune in business, chiefly by his success in bringing into operation the machine known as the "spinning-jenny." Having strenuously supported the political and commercial system of Mr. Pitt, and presented the government with the munificent gift of £10,000 for the purposes of the war with France, he was, in 1801, created a baronet; and in the following year he introduced a bill into parliament to ameliorate the condition of apprentices employed in the cotton and woollen trades. He was the largest manufacturer of cotton goods in England, employing no less than fifteen thousand hands; and the fortune which he accumulated enabled him to place all his children in a position of affluence long before his death, which took place in 1830, at the age of eighty.

His eldest son, the subject of this memoir, was born Feb. 5, 1788, and received his education at Harrow and Oxford, at both of which places he was distinguished by the diligence with which he pursued his studies, and the invariable decorum of his manners. At the university he took the degrees of M.A. and D.C.L., and on leaving it, at the age of twenty-one, he was returned for the Irish borough of Cashel, then a pocket constituency, and still notoriously corrupt. His father's wealth and the favour of Pitt caused the young M.P. to be selected to second the address on the opening of the session of 1810, the tendencies of which may be inferred from the political character of a ministry headed by Perceval, Liverpool, and Sidmouth. His talent for debating and his capacity for public business were soon perceived, and in 1811 he was appointed Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, the post now filled by his second son, Mr. Frederick Peel, member for Bury. In the following year he became Chief Secretary for Ireland, a post which he held for six years, his policy being in strict accordance with the despotic and bigoted government which then prevailed, and of which his colleague, Castlereagh, was the congenial representative.

In 1817 he was elected one of the members for the University of Oxford, a constituency to which the ultra-High Church and extreme Conservative views he then held were recommendations more valuable than any others; and in the following year he resigned the Irish Secretaryship, and undertook the chairmanship of the Bank Committee, in which capacity he introduced his bill for the resumption of cash payments, generally known as Peel's Currency Bill, though the chief merit of the project belonged to Mr. Horner. This measure has been much assailed, both in and out of parliament, during the period that has since elapsed, but its principles have been adhered to by every successive administration. In 1822 he succeeded Lord Sidmouth as Home Secretary, with a seat in the Cabinet, and being regarded as the champion of the anti-Romanist party, he, to a certain extent, divided the leadership of the House of Commons with the celebrated Canning. Among many other excellent measures which he brought forward during this period of his parliamentary career, his admirable and humane plans for the reform of the criminal code, which were carried in 1826, must not be forgotten.

Previously to this, in 1820, Mr. Peel had entered the matrimonial state with the daughter of General Sir John Floyd, who was second in command at the storming of Seringapatam; and by this lady he had five sons and two daughters, the eldest of the former, who succeeded to the baronetcy, having been for several years attached to the Swiss embassy. On the dissolution of the Earl of Liverpool's administration in 1827, and the succession of Canning, at that time the brightest star in the political firmament, to the premiership, Mr. Peel and five of his colleagues retired from office, through open and

avowed hostility to the views entertained by that eminent statesman on the question of Roman Catholic emancipation. Canning, after a very brief enjoyment of the sweets of office, died in August of the same year, and was succeeded by the weak and equally short-lived administration of Lord Goderich; which again gave place, in January, 1828, to the stronger government of the Duke of Wellington. This cabinet must be regarded as representing the school of Sidmouth and Castlereagh, from which Canning was a seceder. Mr. Peel was appointed to the Home Office under the great duke, and almost immediately received from Lord John Russell, then an active leader of the Reform party, a signal defeat on the Test and Corporation Acts, the repeal of which the government, however reluctantly, were obliged to concede. Peel, indeed, opposed but a feeble resistance to Lord John's measure; and it is probable that he already saw the necessity to his future fame of a departure from those worn-out dogmas which had hitherto governed the country, and to which he had thus far closely adhered. In 1829 the Catholic Disabilities Bill was introduced by the government,—not apparently from changed convictions on the subject, but, as the Duke of Wellington stated in the Upper House, to prevent the horrors of civil war. In the House of Commons, Mr. Peel expressed himself in a similar manner:—"He should follow the example of the pilot," he said, "who did not always steer the same course to guard his ship from danger, but a different course under different circumstances as they arose, in order to save the vessel from the very dangers which the captain and the crew most dreaded."

The bill was carried, and the excitement produced by it throughout the United Kingdom was immense. It was a rare and striking instance of a measure of justice and amelioration being brought into operation by a government in opposition to public opinion. The ultra-Protestants laboured to raise the spirit of bigotry, and relume the torches that fired the metropolis in 1780; they accused Peel of having betrayed them; and so great was the dissatisfaction expressed by his constituents at Oxford, that he felt himself called upon to resign his seat. He again presented himself as a candidate, however; but men's passions were too fiercely excited for the voice of reason to be heard, and he was rejected for Sir Robert H. Inglis, who kept the seat till the present session of 1854. By an arrangement with Sir M. Lopez, uncle of the baronet of that name who lately represented South Devon, he was returned for the close borough of Westbury; but his father dying in 1830, he succeeded to the representation of Tamworth along with the baronetcy, and continued to sit for that borough till his death. The outbreak of the French revolution gave such an impetus to the cause of parliamentary reform, that the ministry saw that resistance to the popular demand, weakened as the Conservative party was by the divisions created by the Catholic emancipation question, would be ineffectual; and, to avoid facing it, the Duke of Wellington conveniently took occasion, from a defeat on Sir H. Parnell's question for a revision of the civil list, to retire from office.

Sir Robert now became the acknowledged leader of the Conservative party, which arrayed itself for the great struggle of parliamentary reform. His opposition to the Reform Bill introduced by the Grey administration, which had succeeded that of the Iron Duke, was able and persevering, but fruitless; the popular cause triumphed, because the people were united and had confidence in their leaders. That confidence was betrayed, and partial success divided one section of the people from the other; for each class becomes conservative as it acquires its share of political power. Grey and Brougham took office in the zenith of their popularity, the latter in particular having enunciated opinions during the Reform agitation that he would now denounce as anarchical and subversive. These men have never been surpassed in violence of declamation while the field was yet unwon; but no sooner were they in possession of the Treasury benches than they began to prevaricate, to belie their solemn promises, and to initiate a reactionary policy. Retribution speedily followed: they were expelled from office in 1834, and Sir Robert Peel was sent for

from Rome to, form a new administration. He had reconstructed his party on the basis of the altered constitution of the House of Commons; but ability and organisation did not prevent it from being outvoted on the first night of the session, on the election of speaker; and being thrice defeated on the Irish Tithe Bill, the Peel administration went out in April, 1835, and was succeeded by that of Lord Melbourne and the Whigs. In May, 1839, the ministry were defeated on the Jamaica Bill, and retired for a time from office; but Sir Robert having stipulated that her Majesty should dismiss the Whig ladies of her household, as necessary to his independent action, a feminine conspiracy was formed against him, which obliged him to resign the reins of government almost as soon as he had grasped them. Melbourne and the Whigs returned to office, exulting in the success which had resulted from the machinations of their ladies, but so damaged in reputation, that the conservative leader rose more rapidly in popular estimation as chief of the opposition than he probably would have done at that time as head of an administration.

The retrogressive tendencies and administrative incapacity of the Whigs speedily became so glaring, that when Sir Robert proposed his vote of want of confidence, in May, 1841, a debate of eight nights resulted in their discomfiture—the division giving them a majority of *one*, in a house of 625. Parliament was dissolved, and the Conservative party prepared for a hard struggle to regain the power of which the Reform Bill had deprived them since 1830. Their active efforts in the registration courts, the ruined fame of the Whigs, and the short-sightedness displayed by that party in proposing a fixed duty of eight shillings per quarter on corn, combined to give Sir Robert Peel a large majority in the new parliament; and he immediately availed himself of the advantages of his position to initiate measures which have been of great benefit to the country, and which placed him at once at the head of all the statesmen of the day. In his address to the electors of Tamworth, on his accepting office, he made some observations which shadowed forth his future policy, though their practical drift was not perceived at the time. He said: "If necessities were so pressing as to demand it, there was no dishonour or discredit in relinquishing opinions or measures, and adopting others more suited to the altered state of the country. For this course of proceeding he had been censured by opposite parties—by those who, upon all occasions, thought that no changes were required; as well as by those who, in his opinion, were the advocates of too violent and sudden innovations. He held it impossible for any statesman to adopt one fixed line of policy under all circumstances; and the only question with him, when he departed from that line, should be, Am I actuated by any interested or sinister motive? Do I consider the measure I contemplate called for by the circumstances and necessities of the country?" That Sir Robert was *not* actuated by interested motives is apparent from the fact, that three-fourths of his large property consisted of land; and that Free Trade was imperatively called for by the exigencies of the country must now be obvious to all. In 1842 he commenced the changes he had resolved upon by the most extensive revision of the tariff that had ever been made—a measure which gained him the confidence of the party of Cobden and Villiers, and the approbation of the country, in proportion as he lost that of his own party and a large section of the aristocracy. His administration divided upon the question of opening the ports to foreign corn, though famine was then threatening the country; and in December, 1845, the secession of Lord Stanley led to a resignation. Lord John Russell attempted to form a cabinet, but was prevented by disputes among his own followers, and Sir Robert was recalled, as the only hope of the nation, unless, indeed, her Majesty had sent for Mr. Cobden.

Shortly after the opening of the session of 1846, the minister announced his intention of complying with the prayer of the people by entirely repealing the obnoxious corn-law. This announcement created, among his followers and the landed aristocracy, as much confusion and dismay as the emancipa-

tion of our Roman Catholic fellow-countrymen in 1829. Again was the minister accused of deceiving and betraying his party and the country; but to all these charges and reproaches he replied with calm dignity, repudiating that inflexibility which is sometimes supposed to constitute consistency, and defending his measures on the ground of their imperative necessity. He persevered, in the most praiseworthy manner, against the bitter but unavailing opposition of the Protectionists; and his policy triumphed in both houses of parliament. Almost simultaneously with the abrogation of the corn-laws, Sir Robert resigned office, an anomalous coalition of Whigs and Protectionists having defeated him on the Irish Coercion Bill. The Whigs succeeded him in the government, and received his support in all of their measures that deserved it; but he always declared that, from that time, he had no wish to resume office. The last time he spoke in the house was on Friday, the 28th of June, 1850, on the foreign policy of the government. On the afternoon of the following day, while riding near Buckingham Palace, his horse started and threw him over his head, falling heavily upon him. He was conveyed home, and medical assistance was immediately procured; but all the appliances of science were unavailing; he sank gradually, and expired July 2nd, lamented by all who had experienced the beneficial effects of his commercial and fiscal policy, or admired and respected him as an upright and gifted statesman, and a lover of truth and justice. The most accurate estimate ever expressed of his capacity is, perhaps, that in the Biography of Lord George Bentinck, by the Right Hon. Member for Bucks. According to that great authority, in person, Sir Robert Peel was tall and very good-looking; his forehead was high and broad, indicating mental faculties of no common order, and the general expression of his countenance was mild, grave, and dignified. Endowed by nature with a comprehensive and vigorous mind, his powers of application were aided by a memory remarkably retentive, and the communication of his ideas by a clear and fluent elocution. Method and tact were his in a large degree, two qualities invaluable to a parliamentary debater, in which character he has, perhaps, never been excelled. His memory had accumulated a vast amount of political information, in the use and application of which, and in adapting it to the immediate end in view, he was extremely happy. But successful as he was as a debater, he was far from being a first-rate orator; his style was lucid and fluent, but he had very little imagination, and his speeches were impressed with the manner of the lecturer rather than of the advocate. He had a fine voice, and, with more imagination and warmth, would have been one of the best speakers in the house; as it was, he was inferior as an orator to Canning, O'Connell, Disraeli, and other men of less ability.

What most strikes the observer in glancing over Sir Robert Peel's parliamentary career, is the fact that he was always in a state of transition. He was always learning, and as fast as new ideas became impressed upon his mind, he applied them in the administration, and converted them into realities. Hence the apparent inconsistency of his conduct as a politician. Though long the head of the Conservative party, his tendencies were, in many respects, more towards progress than those of many who stood in the front ranks of the Opposition. He was deficient in foresight, however; and this occasionally led him into error, and made his transitions more marked and palpable than they would otherwise have been. But as soon as he detected the fallacy that had led him astray, or became convinced that the altered circumstances of the country required a change of governmental policy, he shaped out a new course with promptitude and decision. The explosion of 1830 showed him that the system of Castlereagh and Sidmouth could no longer be continued; and from that time he acted more independently of his party than any leader had ever done before. His mind seemed to expand as he advanced; and as soon as he saw his way clear, he acted on his new convictions with a disregard of personal consequences which is rarely met with in the atmosphere of party.